R E P O R T R E S U M E S

ED 019 209 RE 001 231

LITERATURE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF READING SKILLS.

BY- EARLY, MARGARET J.

PUB DATE APR 68

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.64 14P.

DESCRIPTORS- *OBJECTIVES, *READING INSTRUCTION, *LITERATURE, *SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS, READING SKILLS, READING INTERESTS, READING HABITS, LITERATURE APPRECIATION,

THE MAJOR GOALS OF READING AND LITERATURE WERE CLARIFIED TO EMPHASIZE THE ROLE OF LITERATURE AS A VEHICLE FOR ENJOYMENT RATHER THAN FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF READING-STUDY SKILLS. THE MAJOR GOAL OF READING INSTRUCTION IS THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROFICIENCY IN TASKS REQUIRING READING. THIS GOAL INCLUDES THE DEVELOPMENT OF BASIC VOCABULARY AND COMPREHENSION SKILLS, THE RATE OF READING, READING HABITS, STUDY SKILLS, STUDY TECHNIQUES, AND DESIRABLE ATTITUDES. THE READING TEACHER'S MAIN CONCERN, HOWEVER, SHOULD BE THE DEVELOPMENT OF BASIC VOCABULARY AND COMPREHENSION SKILLS FOR THE RELUCTANT READERS AND PROVIDING FOR INTENSIVE PRACTICE OF STUDY TECHNIQUES AND RATE IMPROVEMENT FOR MOTIVATED READERS. THE MOTIVATION AND EXTENSION OF STUDY SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES FOR ALL STUDENTS SHOULD BE THE CONCERN OF THE CONTENT FIELDS. THE DEVELOPMENT OF DESIRABLE ATTITUDES SHOULD BE FOSTERED IN A LITERATURE PROGRAM MADE POSSIBLE BY THE WISE SELECTION OF BOOKS TO BE READ INCOMMON AND THE USE OF INCOMMON READING TO TEACH STUDENTS HOW TO READ TO ENJOY VARIOUS TYPES OF LITERATURE. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOICATION CONFERENCE (BOSTON, APRIL 24-27, 1968). (NS)

[INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION, BOSTON, APR. 24-27, 1968]

Dr. Margaret J. Early
Associate Director
Reading and Language Arts Center
Syracuse University
508 University Place
Syracuse, New York 13210

ED019209

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Literature and the Development of Reading Skills

IRA Convention
Boston
~~March~~ APRIL, 1968

An important reason for learning to read is to be able to enjoy literature. But we don't read science fiction to improve our ability to cope with a physics textbook. We don't read novels or plays to improve the skills needed for reading a history text, nor do we read poetry to insure our mastery of verbal problems in mathematics. The skills that we develop through the reading of literature serve us best in reading more literature. This is another way of saying that literature is an end in itself, not a means for the development of reading skills.

Such a preamble seems necessary to a clarification of our topic, for the notion persists that "teaching reading" and "teaching literature" are different labels for the same act, whereas "teaching reading" and "teaching history" signify quite different aspects of the curriculum.

RE 001 231

This confusion of "reading" with "literature" probably stems from an elementary school tradition that places literature (of a kind) at the heart of the reading program. Today this tradition is being challenged on two fronts" by those who would give broader dimensions to the teaching of reading and by those who would preserve for literature a respectable and non-utilitarian role in the elementary curriculum. In the secondary school also, we must maintain a distinction between reading and literature since the goals of instruction are quite different and consequently dictate different approaches and materials. A reading teacher in junior high who uses materials that are chiefly literary -- the typical anthology, for instance, or paperback novels -- is either restricting the range of comprehension and study skills that his students need or he is doing violence to the teaching of literature. Similarly, the responsibilities of the teacher of literature are first and foremost to accomplish the aims of the literature curriculum. With respect to the development of reading skills, he has certain responsibilities, but these are of the same order as the responsibilities of the teacher of history or science or business law: that is, to help his students achieve the skills needed to read his subject.

The Aims of Reading Instruction

Perhaps the clearest way to make the distinction between reading and literature is to examine their different goals. The reading teacher's aim is to improve his students' proficiency in all tasks that require reading, from reading a Sears, Roebuck catalog or instructions for operating a voting machine to grasping the argument of a political essayist or

comprehending an explanation of the theories of light. The aim is impossibly broad. To cope with the impossible, then, the reading teacher assumes that some reading skills are basic to all reading tasks. Some are, but they are more basic than the typical student in secondary school needs. For instance, word analysis skills are basic to every reading task, but most junior high school students are already proficient in these skills. Understanding syntactic structures is basic, but high school students have generally mastered the analysis of sentence patterns as an aid to comprehension. On the other hand, there are certain skills that high school students need: e.g. analysis of thought patterns in longer units than the sentence, bringing relevant ideas to the acquisition of new concepts, setting purposes, achieving flexible reading rates, making judgments about what is read. These are all skills that the typical secondary school student needs to develop at increasingly complex levels, but how can we help without anchoring skills to specific subject matter? So, the reading and study skills course in the secondary school becomes a microcosm of the total curriculum, or at least of that part of it shared by the students in a given class. This is an exceptionally difficult task -- I said before that it was impossible -- but many reading teachers attempt it, with the help of published materials that purport to teach, rather, the reading skills of the content fields. (What they really do is provide practice.) Their attempts often fail if we are to judge by the complaints of subject-matter teachers who claim that students who have had the reading course still cannot read their subject-matter textbooks. This negative evaluation, while often justified, casts blame in the wrong direction. The fault lies not with the reading teacher in attempting the impossible but with the philosophy of the school which encourages

him to try.

So long as the reading teacher tries to be every teacher, he should grant equal time to all subjects. It is unfair for him to use literature more frequently than math or science for the development of reading skills. But he often does so, and with reason. Perhaps the most defensible of his reasons is that, while his primary aim is skills development, he can't do much with skills unless the students want to. Motivation is the reading teacher's bete noir. Until students have developed a friendly attitude toward print, teaching comprehension and study skills is futile. So the reading teacher finds that the paperback library, the literature sampler, the collection of short stories, even the typical anthology are better bait than the thousand-word excerpt from the biology text, the Problems of Democracy handbook, or the encyclopedia article. The human interest factor in novels and short stories appeals not only to the students but to the teacher. Not a subject-matter specialist himself, he lacks the background and enthusiasm to generate interest in specific subject fields. He is happier with narrative and fictional materials than with argument and exposition, and he can use fiction quite legitimately for developing vocabulary and basic comprehension skills, since there is more than a grain of truth in the dictum that we learn to read by reading.

The approach to reading skills through the use of trade books has much to be said for it, and a few things to be said against it. For the immature or reluctant reader, a daily period spent in reading for one's own purpose -- not to classify or summarize information, not even to develop word lists or to answer teachers' questions -- may, over the long run, develop that friendly attitude toward print which is basic to

skills development. Certainly reading for its own sake is preferable to unmotivated skills practice, which at best is a game and at worst is a bore. In the elementary school such a program of free reading is often designated as "individualized reading." In a secondary school adaptation, it is shown to best advantage in Daniel Fader's Hooked on Books. You remember that in the situations described by Fader the free reading of paperbacks, accompanied by much personal writing, was offered to disadvantaged and delinquent youth in place of the traditional English course.

The justification for this approach in a typical secondary school reading class depends on whether it is a beginning, or an end in itself. For many students, reading for its own sake is a dead end, at least in terms of the academic orientation of the secondary school. (I don't know of any high schools that are not academically oriented.) The interest-centered reading course is an excellent beginning for the study of literature, and in fact the reading teacher is acting most like a literature teacher when he adopts this approach. But so far as the real aims of reading instruction in the high school, that is, the preparation of students for successful independent study of academic subjects, the reading teacher may find himself not much better off than before. Through an interest-centered approach his students may acquire a taste for reading as daydreaming and be as unmotivated as ever so far as textbook study is concerned. My suggestion for the way out of this dilemma is to narrow the aims of the reading teacher to (a) developing basic vocabulary and comprehension skills for those few who need instruction at relatively low

levels; and (b) providing intensive practice in general study techniques and rate improvement for motivated students (that is, in elective courses). I would leave to the literature teacher the responsibility for developing friendly attitudes toward personal reading. I would leave to the subject-matter teachers the responsibility for motivating study skills development. Because of their enthusiasm for their subject they have a much better chance for success than the reading teacher had. Let's look at the contrasting aims of the literature program.

The Aims of Literature

Literature is different from any other field in the curriculum because what is to be learned is subordinate to what is to be felt or sensed or experienced. Some knowledge about literature is part of the curriculum but only because knowledge of literary forms, techniques, writers, and history contributes to a broadening of the literary experience. Knowledge of literature is an enabling objective in the same way that vocabulary and comprehension skills make possible the initial in-take of a work of literature. Skills of literary analysis or criticism -- what the reading teacher might call "interpretation and judgment" -- are similarly enabling objectives. But neither knowledge nor the skills of literary analysis are the major goal. Many people today are defining the goal of literature study in the schools as the "education of the imagination" or the development of "personally meaningful responses" to poetry, fiction, and drama. They would thus distinguish literature from almost wholly cognitive fields such as history or science as well as from the essentially skills-oriented subjects such as reading, spelling, arithmetic, and functional writing. This is a helpful distinction.

I think most teachers of literature would agree with the foregoing summary. They surely would agree with the even broader statement with which this paper begins: an important reason for learning to read is to be able to enjoy literature. Alas, there is very little agreement on ways to achieve this generally accepted major goal. Usually it is forgotten while efforts are concentrated on the secondary or enabling objectives. Perhaps one reason is that it is very hard to evaluate "enjoyment" or to measure the dimensions of a literary experience; it is easier to test knowledge of literature and the techniques of literary analysis.

Selecting the Content of Literature

When the goal of teaching is to permit the literary experience to happen, our first concern is with the selection of books to be read. Probably more literature programs fail because of unwise selection than for any other reason. Of course, when we speak of "selection" we are assuming that some works of literature are to be read in common. (We could make a case for guided free reading, with few or no works read in common, if our students were either very immature and inexperienced with literature of any kind, or if they were advanced readers of considerable literary sophistication.) Assuming "average" students, say the middle 75 percent, we would advocate in-common reading of a few works, supplemented by much personal reading on related themes.

Ideally, selection should be made by the teacher who is to guide the reading and by the students who are to share it. But even at the height of the paperback explosion, such flexibility is rarely practical, however. Nevertheless, today we can have a wider choice of works to be read in common, with a different broad list for each track, and we can improve the initial selection of these works. The first criterion obviously

should be that the work says something to adolescents, and for practical considerations I would give priority to the work that says something briefly. That is, for in-common reading, I would prefer short stories to novels, a short novel to a long one, a three-act play to a five-act, and (because all real poetry is brief) poetry to prose.

Finding literary works that say something to adolescents is complicated by other criteria that must also be considered. If the work to be read in common is brief, we would risk its being fairly difficult, but if the shared experience is to be a novel, it must be easy enough for the students to read it first on their own at a surface level of comprehension. Moreover, the work that has something to say to youth should say it in the best possible way; it should have recognizable literary merit, since one reason for the in-common reading is to study how the artist achieves his effects. The criteria of length, difficulty and literary merit, though, must be subordinate to the content of ideas. The most compelling reason for reading when you are young is to find out about yourself. Will the adolescent reader find <u>himself</u> in the short story, novel or poem? The answer to this question is so hard to predict that I wonder how any book selection committee can operate without first trying out the possible choices on adolescents. Surely, the books selected for in-common reading should be drawn from those which have proved most significant in the free-reading choices of students most like the ones we have in mind.

The literature teacher can have a freedom in the choice of materials that is unheard of in any other department. He is therefore in a better position to match the reading skills of his students with books that provide sufficient challenge without frustration. What prevents teachers

from making this perfect match? Knowing too little about our students' abilities on the one hand and too little of the range of literature that is accessible to adolescents. More often than not we overestimate average students' abilities. For instance, we tend to ignore the tremendous gulf between the vocabularies of 12-to-15 year olds and those of adult authors, even contemporary ones. On the other hand, when we become concerned about reading skills and readability levels, we sometimes restrict mature but slow readers to the pap of teen-age tales when they are really ready for popular adult fiction.

Surprisingly, many literature teachers have a narrow range of reading themselves. After years of study they have developed enthusiasms for authors and periods which they would inflict upon the young along with ready-made critical opinions. Just as students are too young for the sophisticated tastes of the teacher, the latter is prevented by years of experience from a ready acceptance of the quite respectable literature which is written specifically for the adolescent. The teacher, because of his trained literary judgment, can learn to extend his range of appreciation downward, whereas the student cannot leap to the head of the stairs.

There is no doubt that adolescent novels belong in the classroom library, but should they be selected for in-common reading and study? It would be appropriate to do so when the students' reading experience is limited, as it is in many junior high classes, and when one of our purposes might be to examine a simple thesis novel. For example, Nat Hentoff's Jazz Country can be read easily by students who have not yet acquired adult vocabularies, and it deals with a matter of contemporary

concern: black nationalism. For some groups it would serve as an exploration of values; for others it could be used further to study characterization and plot development. Dozens of junior novels could be cited for in-common reading with young, inexperienced, and somewhat handicapped readers. For older students who have passed through (or by) the stage of the junior novel, or who may have missed it unfortunately, the search must turn to popular adult fiction which can be read quickly and understood at least superficially the first time through. A book that twenty-five students consider worthy of re-reading is not easy to find. That's one reason why the shared literary experience should be brief so we minimize the waste of time that results from wrong choices.

Literature for in-common reading suitable for mature but retarded readers seldom meets all the criteria. We usually have to sacrifice appropriate readability levels in order to meet their demand for mature content of ideas. Then we have to compensate somehow for the difficulty level, for ease of in-take must be assured. Otherwise, the reluctant reader chooses not to read, and the hoped for literary experience never takes place. An obvious compensation is to present the work orally -- another reason for choosing a short selection. Energetic and enthusiastic teachers have found ways to put whole novels on tape and to provide headsets for one group to listen while another group discusses what they have just absorbed.

Much of the standard fare of secondary school literature curriculums falls down on one or more of the selection criteria. The novel is too long, too remote from the concerns of youth, too complex in plot, too advanced in vocabulary. The poem is esoteric and complex. The play is couched in blank verse and filled with obscure allusions. Or the work of literature may meet all our criteria, but wise selection is thwarted by bad teaching. The work is presented to students not as an enlargement

of their experience but as an exercise in literary criticism. In The Groves of Academe, Mary McCarthy reports on a college English department meeting that might well take place in a contemporary secondary school. The antagonist says:

> "Your department's monstrously one-sided -- you're concerned with formal questions exclusively: Tolstoy's method, the method of Virginia Woolf, the elucidation of Mann's symbols, the patterns of Katherine Ann Porter. All appropriate enough for criticism, but it isn't what the student reads for. A student reads an author for his ideas.... He wants to detach from an author a portable philosophy, like the young Joyce in A Portrait of the Artist -- a laudable aim which you discourage by your insistence on the inseparability of form and content."

Reasons for Reading in Common

Although too much time is given to in-common reading in most classrooms, there are at least two reasons why some time must be spend in group study of a single text. First, to teach how to read various kinds of literature. By "how to read" I mean the whole gamut of skills from drawing inferences about setting, character and plot, to understanding mood, tone and specific literary devices like irony and paradox, to identifying complex symbols and responding to intricate imagery. The lower level skills are necessary for initial comprehension; the highest level are matters of literary analysis. In either case, the adroit teacher will remember that they are enabling skills; practicing them must lead toward enjoyment, not destroy it.

There are many ways of teaching literary reading skills. The simpler skills I would teach directly with the briefest possible examples. examining clues to setting, for instance, by studying just the opening paragraphs of one short story after another. But more often we would need to direct the application of skills to a whole work -- a poem, story,

drama, and even novel. Study guides prepared by the teacher or textbook editor can focus on skills development. If the guides are used sensibly as a means of engaging everyone in the class in fruitful analysis and discussion, they can streamline the task of teaching reading skills in literature as in any subject.

The second reason for valuing in-common reading has to do with heightening the literary experience. I suspect that what makes one person a more appreciative reader than another is that he has learned to react to certain words and images by bringing the appropriate experience to them. This means he has learned to sort out his experiences and relate the right one to the poet's image. He has learned to ask the right questions about literature. This interaction with the poem (or short story or novel) can be refined, I suspect, by additive experience, some of which will come from observing another's responses to a selection read in common. Creating group interaction with a piece of literature is a delicate art, difficult to achieve and impossible to prescribe. Perhaps the most that a teacher can contribute to it is selecting the literature which may inspire it, refraining from imposing his own judgments, and calling a halt to discussion that becomes irrelevant to the literature and so destructive of the literary experience.

When everyone in a group reads the same piece of literature, the teacher's responsibility is to make sure that everyone has a chance of understanding it at one level of appreciation or another. The best way to do this, as we have said, is to take extreme care in the selection. Even so, the work worth reading in common is most likely to present degrees of challenge to any group. So the teacher does what he can to

get students involved. Sometimes this is no more than reading the first chapter or two of a novel to the class; then if the work has been well chosen, the author should take over. With a poem he would surely read it aloud himself and explain obscure allusions or diction, at least enough to open up the poem to the students' own explorations. How to do enough without doing too much is, of course, the thin wire which a good teacher walks daily.

Opening up a work of literature to the student often, but not always, involves these steps from the directed reading lesson: setting purposes and relating to the student's experience, developing background, and teaching vocabulary and concepts. Developing vocabulary is an important side-product of literature study and one that must be handled skillfully. Although we know that teaching vocabulary before the words are encountered in the selection is more likely to be effective than word study following the reading, it is futile to teach too many words too far in advance of their appearance in the text. This problem is especially acute when the selection is a novel. One solution is to provide glossaries in the chapter-by-chapter study guides that might be prepared as aids to the first independent reading. Here, as with any selection, we must choose a few crucial words and ignore others which may be interesting but not essential. If we have done a good job of vocabulary teaching all along, many students will be motivated to pick up themselves some of the words we have ignored, adding them to their personal word lists. Important though vocabulary development is, however, we must not let it distract us from the primary goal of the literary experience. It would be better to avoid the danger by keeping vocabulary load in mind as we choose in-

common reading selections. Fortunately, high school students can, within limits, tolerate a heavier load of "hard" words and still maintain comprehension so long as interest is strong.

Summary

Much more needs to be said about what reading skills can contribute to the experience of literature than time or space restrictions allow. The points which we have tried to make are these: Literature is not an appropriate vehicle for reading-study skills development needed by most students in secondary schools. For some students, however, "trade" books in a "wide reading" program are useful for motivational purposes and for exercising basic skills. The aim of literature is enjoyment, and this aim must not be thwarted by overemphasis on either reading skills or literary analysis. The role of the teacher is to enhance the literary experience through wise selection of the works to be read in common and through the use of in-common reading to teach how to read literature.